

## **Acculturation in Classroom Teaching**

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### **Abstract**

Sociolinguistic theories of second language acquisition (SLA) are of great importance to classroom teaching, though they are often not considered or properly understood by language teachers. Teachers often place a lot of emphasis on such things as grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation. Recently, teachers have started to focus more on a communicative approach in order to get students actually practicing speaking (and other skills) in the classroom rather than simply learning grammar drills out of context. However, it is my belief that not enough attention is given to relating these exercises to students' sociological and psychological needs. I posit that a thorough consideration of sociolinguistic factors within the classroom and also outside of the classroom will help to augment students' achievement in learning a second language. With this in mind, I will discuss an important sociolinguistic model of language acquisition: Schumann's (1986) acculturation model.

## **An Overview of Schumann's Acculturation Model**

First and foremost, in this paper, I do not argue that the acculturation model is the best model at explaining how SLA occurs. There are many factors involved in this process and, needless to say, the acculturation model can only explain a part of it. Spolsky (1989) argues that the model has only indirect effects on SLA, though he does consider social factors as significant aspects of the learning process. My argument is simply that, despite the fact that the acculturation model does not explain the process of SLA, its relevance in the field of language learning and teaching is of great significance it and should be considered a required reading for instructors of second language learners.

The most important supposition of Schumann's (1986) model is that "the degree to which a learner acculturates to the TL [target language] group will control the degree to which he acquires the second language" (p. 384). While he insists that this is not a simple "one-to-one" relationship, it is quite clear that he believes there is an important relationship between SLA and acculturation. If acculturation is so important to language acquisition, the question is how we, as teachers, can maximise the potential for students to acculturate, and hence improve the rate of language acquisition. While Schumann does not cover issues relating to classroom teaching, I feel that teachers are able to help students' acculturation in a wide variety of ways.

### **Factors in the Acculturation Model**

#### **Social factors.**

The acculturation model consists of two main groups of factors: *social factors* and *affective factors*. Social factors affect a group of learners as a whole, while affective factors help to explain individual variation within a group. Each factor in Schumann's (1986) taxonomy is briefly explained below along with comments on its relevance and importance to classroom teaching.

The first factor Schumann discusses is related to social dominance patterns. He claims that if either the second language learner (SLL) group or the target language (TL) group is socially dominant (or inferior) "it will tend not to learn the target language" (p. 384). For example, the British in India (during the British occupation of the country) could well have learnt Hindi or other Indian languages, yet because they felt themselves to be superior very few British

felt the need to learn local languages. Similarly, Schumann claims that the SLL group will not acquire the language in a situation where it is subordinate, though he provides little evidence for this (Schumann, 1986). In fact, it could be argued that in many cases the subordinate group has great motivation to learn the language of the dominant group, and this could facilitate acquisition. While few British people learned Indian languages, many (though not the majority of) Indians learned English. The importance of English in India even to this day perhaps reflects the economic importance of English both in the past and now. Schumann believes, however, that a close proximity of status of a SLL group and a TL group facilitates learning (Schumann, 1986).

On the surface, at least, social dominance patterns would seem to be out of the realm of the classroom teacher's jurisdiction—the teacher cannot change the social status of two groups of people. It is, however, possible to create an atmosphere of relatively equal status within the classroom, whereby students feel comfortable talking to the teacher in an informal way. As Japanese students tend to be shy and intimidated by the idea of speaking to a teacher in a language that is not their first, it is imperative teachers exhaust all options to allow students the best opportunity to contribute. In situations where the teacher's status is considerably above that of students, it may be socially inappropriate for students and teachers to chat together informally. This will reduce opportunities and motivation for student-teacher discussion. In many language classrooms today, teachers already opt for a more informal approach. One way of doing this, for example, is to address members of the classroom on a first-name basis. Attempts to narrow the status gap between students and teachers are likely to be conducive to learning if Schumann's claims regarding dominance patterns are correct. Students need to feel comfortable using the TL with the teacher.

The next factor Schumann discusses is the type of integration strategy, of which there are three. *Assimilation* involves the SLL group adopting the values and lifestyle of the TL group. This can help SLA by increasing contact with the TL group. *Preservation* is essentially the opposite strategy—the SLL group “maintains its own life style and values and rejects those of the TL group” (p. 381), thus creating distance between the two groups and presumably limiting language acquisition. *Adaptation* is essentially a compromise between the first two strategies—adapting certain values of the TL group while preserving the SLL group's own values. Naturally, the strategy of any particular group or individual could fall between any of these categories, and thus can be seen as a continuum.

In a classroom setting, the type of strategy used by students will vary according to the type of group. Students within their own country may lean towards a preservation strategy, whereas students learning in an area where the TL is spoken may opt for a more adaptive or assimilative strategy. This is largely out of the classroom teacher's control since students are affected by a diverse range of factors (location, opinion of the TL, the TL group's culture, values, and so on) before they begin the course. However, while it is not the place of a teacher to push students towards assimilation into a particular society, he or she may try to encourage a certain amount of adaptation. That is, encouraging students to take an interest in the TL group's culture, lifestyles and values (though not at the expense of their own). For example, the teacher might introduce students to music of the TL group, or encourage students to read about the culture. Research on teaching culture has shown that language and culture are closely related (Brown, 2007; Schulz, 2007) and are best acquired together (Schulz, 2007). Highlighting cultural as well as linguistic differences is an imperative part of language-learning. It can rouse students' interest and inspire independent learning. Brown (2007) details the interrelatedness of culture and language stating "that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture. The acquisition of a second language, except for specialized, instrumental acquisition [...], is also the acquisition of a second culture" (pp. 189-190). Where possible, teachers could also take students on field trips or to sports events that are popular with the TL group. It is essential, of course, that teachers choose activities that are of interest to the students in order to encourage rather than discourage adaptation strategies.

The third social factor is *enclosure*. High enclosure means that the SLL group and the TL group have separate institutions and activities (such as clubs, schools, churches, and so on), while low enclosure means that there is considerable integration in these areas. Schumann claims that lower enclosure helps language acquisition (Schumann, 1986). The amount of enclosure is likely to be affected by the next factors in Schumann's taxonomy: *cohesiveness* and the *size of the group*. Cohesiveness refers to the extent to which the group sticks together, although as Spolsky (1989) notes, it is "different in an unexplained way from enclosure" (p. 143). That is, it seems like a very similar factor. The size of the SLL group can have an effect on the amount of enclosure (and cohesiveness)—the larger the group, the more likely they will have their own institutions and activities involving their own group. Small communities will not be able to maintain a wide variety of institutions, so enclosure is likely to be low. Therefore, members of

the group are more likely to have a need to mix with TL speakers, consequently increasing opportunities for language acquisition.

Language institutions and teachers can do a number of things to reduce enclosure. Firstly, as suggested above under adaptation strategies, teachers can encourage participation in various activities with the TL group (not only amongst members within their own group). Schools should also create opportunities for students to interact with speakers of the TL outside the classroom, and if possible bring TL speakers into the classroom in order to expose them as much as possible to the TL speakers' way of life. As for limiting the size of an SLL group, one option is to bring SLLs from various backgrounds (for instance, Chinese, Vietnamese and Thai) into the one classroom. This can help reduce the cohesiveness of a learner group within the classroom—the students will be less tempted to speak in their own language. This effect may also overflow to outside the classroom, as students who make friends with people of many different nationalities may be less inclined to spend a lot of time with members of their own group. Of course, it is still necessary for them to speak with members of the TL group, not only other SLLs from other groups. Schools can try to set up exchange programmes and activities involving TL speakers to help create opportunities for more interaction.

The final three social factors of Schumann will be discussed briefly. *Congruence* is the similarity between the SLL group's culture and that of the TL group. The closer the cultures are to each other, the easier it is to acquire the respective TL. Obviously, a teacher is incapable of changing either group's culture, although it may be fruitful to talk about similarities and differences in the cultures of the two (or more) groups in class. *Attitudes* of the SLL group and the TL group to each other are also important—a positive attitude will facilitate exchange. Again, the language teacher should try to encourage positive attitudes within the classroom, although there may be underlying views towards the other culture that a teacher is incapable of changing. Promoting positive attitudes in classrooms facilitates learning in any capacity and is something teachers should be actively aspiring to do. The *length of stay* in the TL country is Schumann's final social factor—the longer a student intends to reside in the country, the more likely acquisition will be facilitated. Many classroom situations of course involve teaching within the SLL group's country, which makes this factor largely irrelevant until those students go to the TL country. Even if the class takes place within the TL country, this factor is largely out of a classroom teacher's control but it is nevertheless worth noting that a teacher can actively

encourage students to spend a long time abroad if they truly wish to learn the language. This could be done by providing reasons (benefits of learning the language, such as for employment, education, social reasons, and so on) for staying abroad for an extended period.

### **Affective factors.**

The second group of variables that contributes to acculturation is *affective* factors. These are psychological factors that contribute to variation between individuals: “An individual may learn under social conditions which are not favourable for SLA and may not learn under social conditions which appear to be favourable” (Schumann, 1986, p. 382). The four affective factors that Schumann discusses are: *language shock*, *cultural shock*, *motivation* and *ego-permeability*. Language shock occurs when learners are afraid they might seem foolish due to their lack of ability to speak the TL. Adult learners are particularly worried about making mistakes and this can lead them to clam up in the classroom. Some classroom teachers attempt to overcome this problem by insisting that making mistakes is okay, and that it is also an ordinary part of the language acquisition process. I feel that teachers should still try to correct a certain amount of mistakes, particularly those that occur frequently and those that are likely to cause misunderstanding. However, correction should occur mainly during more formal exercises, such as drills, and should be avoided during activities where students need to communicate or give opinions. Many students require a lot of encouragement, and constant correction could lead them to lose confidence.

Cultural shock is “anxiety resulting from the disorientation encountered upon entering a new culture” (Schumann, 1986, p. 383). Students who move to other countries often find it difficult to settle in, and this can affect their mood and their learning. This is a largely out-of-classroom phenomenon, though unfamiliar classroom situations with students and teachers from different cultures may well contribute to a degree. Language institutions can help by providing students with information about the culture and organising programmes that help students to integrate more smoothly. Teachers should also spend some time discussing problems students have experienced, and take an interest in how students are faring.

Motivation is an essential factor that is often discussed by language teachers. It is easy to see that students who are motivated are far more likely to succeed than those who are not. Schumann discusses Gardner and Lambert’s (1972) two types of motivation: *integrative* and

*instrumental*. Integrative motivation means that the learner “wants to learn the second language in order to meet with, talk to, find out about and, perhaps, become like speakers of the target language whom he both values and admires” (Schumann, 1986, p. 383). Instrumental motivation involves studying to further a goal, such as employment or passing exams. If teachers are going to complain about students’ lack of motivation, they should at least try to improve it. Certainly, a student’s motivation (or lack of it) may be largely determined before he/she starts a language course. However, teachers can play a part in helping (or hindering) students’ motivation. Firstly, making the subject as interesting as possible is bound to help motivation. Since all students have different needs, teachers should try to identify what each group of students will find interesting. Secondly, teachers can enhance instrumental motivation by bringing to students’ attention the benefits of learning the TL. Thinking of the future can be difficult for some students with so many distractions in student life, yet they need to be made aware that failing a course will be detrimental to their future ambitions.

The final affective factor Schumann discusses is *ego-permeability*, which refers to a learner’s lack of inhibition and “openness to TL input” (Schumann, 1986, p. 384). Again, this factor is largely decided before a student enters the classroom. A teacher may be able to encourage ego-permeability in students by doing activities such as role-plays, where students can imagine they are someone else. Using humour in class and avoiding direct criticism may also help reduce inhibition.

### **Conclusion**

The acculturation model does not fully explain how language acquisition occurs. However, it presents us with many factors that contribute heavily to the learning process. Understanding of these factors can help classroom teachers to identify problems that students may have, and to create a better learning environment. Teachers often focus on a wide variety of things, such as grammar form and function, vocabulary, pronunciation and the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. This is a step forward from simply teaching grammar forms and vocabulary. However, it is also important to create an atmosphere in which the students have a positive attitude to the language and the culture of the TL group, especially when students are often shy and cautious (even in their first language). Classroom teachers should encourage students to take an interest in various aspects of the TL group’s culture. They can do

this by providing relevant and interesting materials in class, as well as by having discussions. Teachers should also provide opportunities for students to meet members of the TL group (through language exchanges etc.), participate in sports and activities that are popular with the TL group, and go on field trips in addition to standard classroom activities. This will provide a good atmosphere for enhancing acculturation, and therefore increase the likelihood of students becoming more proficient in the TL.



## References

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